Surprised by God
Genesis 21: 1-7
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The phrase "joyless Christianity" is a contradiction in terms. It makes no sense at all. And yet, I would suggest that, this is precisely what we have on our hands. Religion sans joy. I keep returning to this theme - but I do so because it keeps coming up in my perception of the Church - and particularly the Church as I work in and through it in this place.

There is, I would propose, about our religion too much theorizing and too little feeling: too much talking and too little experiencing: too much discussing and too little acting. For the life of me I can not recall ever feeling joyful - or experiencing deep happiness as the result of a discussion group. Theories are ideas: and ideas which remain locked in the mind soon die there. That is our problem: the Gospel of Jesus Christ withers - and dies in the recesses of our minds: and we possess a religion without joy.

This is not, in any way, to say that religion is only an emotional - feeling - type of experience. It is not, in any way, to disparage the honest intellectual quest of a seeking mind. Far from it. That extreme too bogs down in its own blind alley. In this complex age - in this complex society we need to be thinking deeply about the meaning of our faith: we need to know what is going on in the world, and how that, whatever it is, relates to our faith. We must be theologians, everyone of us. Our problem lies in the fact that for many of us this is all there is.

It all began with the Enlightenment that period in history which followed the Dark Ages. For a thousand years the human intellect was the captive of a barbarian and ignorant mentality. Men lived their lives on the basis of superstition. Man's progress, intellectually, culturally, technically and socially came to a rude halt - and remained static for a millenium. Then the Enlightenment - the Renaissance - art flourished, philosophy was reborn, symphonies were composed and books written. The movement then began which gave birth to the industrial

revolution - the birth of democracy and the flourishing of Western Civilization. And its keystone - was human reason. Man had the capacity to think - and with his intellectual power alone he could do any thing.

Religion, too came under the strong influence of rationalism. The Reformation liberated the philosophers from the dim superstitions of medieval catholicism. The mysticism was jettisoned - the mystery and allure of a God who could be persuaded to act in certain ways by lighting candles was rejected. God - like everything else - could be understood. And religion - religion became a very cerebral matter.

We are children of that enlightenment mentality: our whole civilization is, and you and I individually are. Our theology has to be entirely rational - and if we can't understand it - we aren't buying any, thank you. Our God is in a box - the box of the human mind.There he must play by our rules, and act in ways we can understand and speak in ways we can comprehend - and obey the laws of nature as we have discovered them. We don't let our God out of that box either, because there is risk in that. The minute God starts operating in categories - other than those we use - we are in big trouble.

We reject, automatically, the antics of our Pentecostal brothers —sometimes for good reasons. But mostly I believe it is because their lusty joy - their shattering conversion experiences, their focus on the mystical power of the Holy Spirit assaults something that is very precious to us - our rational theology of a perfectly understandable, perfectly domestic God. We back away from anyone who talks about God calling him to do this or that - God speaking - God, in fact, doing anything at all, sometimes for good reason, but mostly because that assaults our precious Presbyterian God who does not do anything that connot be explained by a clinical psychologist.

This sermon and this line of thinking began again for me last Monday: after a hard eight week push - in the post Stewardship let down, and pre-advent dryness. In the crisis of dryness which afflicts everyone who must speak publically once a week, I found myself rummaging around in, of all places, the book of

Genesis, and focusing finally on one of the stories I've known since childhood - the Birth of Issac. But this time - a phrase jumped out of the text: a phrase I really hadn't known was there - a perfectly beautiful and utterly profound phrase - spoken by an old woman who had just borne her first child. Sarah said "God has made laughter for me."

Now before we deal with the subtle impact of that statement, which by the way has stuck in my mind all week long, let us here and now acknowledge that we have a lot of trouble with the whole Old Testament. There is nothing very rational, after all, about talking snakes, axe heads that float, dry bones that dance and a sun that stands still. Things like that don't happen - and when we discover that they don't we encounter our first Old Testament crisis. Perhaps none of it is true - perhaps nothing really happened the way it is told. Many of us, I would suggest, never get over that crisis. We live with it by filing all those Sunday School stories on a shelf in our minds reserved for "Jack and the Bean Stock" and "Snow White". And by refusing to deal with the depth of the crisis, by stalling our motors in the discovery that the Old Testament is not an encyclopedia of historic and anthropologic facts we very conveniently manage to ignore the real issue with which the Old Testament confronts us.

That issue is that there is a God - one God who is totally free. A God who created and continues to create. A God who choses people to do certain things and then gets imtimately involved in their lives. A God who discloses himself in history - big history like a political power struggle between the Babylonian and Persian Empires: and little histories - like the life story of an unremarkable woman by the name of Sarah.

That is, the Old Testament insists that God is really God; not a captive, domestic God who operates in very understandable ways - but a God who is free - and who keeps interjecting himself into the common life of men. We don't, you see, really want to buy that - and therein is our problem.

When they looked back on their own history, for instance to their miraculous

escape from the Egyptian armies at the Red Sea, the Israelites saw an act of God. "God did that for us," they said: "He delivered us out of the hands of the Egyptians." They saw the moving intercession of God in the wilderness - in the battle of Jericho - in their victories and their defeats. Their history was full of surprises - events that told them about God. It was the same for them personally. The very God who delivered them out of the hands of the Egyptians - cared about them individually. God moved across the historic landscape - but he also moved in and out of individual lives. That's what the Old Testament is all about - men who were continually being surprised by God.

And so we come to the story of one of them: an old woman; a very old woman who was baren; a woman who had long since given up any thought of having children. In a culture that valued women only in terms of their reproductive abilities, we are talking about an unsuccessful woman - unhappy, empty, shrieveled and without joy. But Sarah bore a son - and if you've ever witnessed that special joy - that deep and mature joy that an older woman exudes when she has borne a child - you know a little about Sarah. Sarah laughed - at the absurdity of it all - this foolishness that happened to her. But then, we surmise, she laughed because here was something profoundly good; here was life. And Sarah said "God has made laughter for me."

That sentence somehow sums it all up - it expresses the genius of the Old Testament - and it indicts the sterility of our very rational religion.

Have you ever been surprised by God? Has God ever made laughter for you? The question which begs to be asked here, of course, is "Do we really have a God?"

It's finally a matter of how we perceive things. Sarah could well have said: "I have a baby: I'm happy," and left God out. The Psalmist well could have said "When I look at the moon and stars, I marvel in their beauty and wonder about their origin." instead he said: "When I look at the heavens, the moon and stars which thou hast established, what is man that thou art mindful of him?" That is the issue we confront every time we open the pages of the Old Testament.

There is a God: a God who is free to act in ways as surprising as the creation of the cosmos and the birth of a child.

Christians, then, are people who perceive things differently. Christians are people who are always alert to the fact that God is - and that he is very much involved in the life of the world, and with their individual lives. Christians are people who know that secret, and who - because they perceive the power and presence of God are living more and experiencing more - and crying more - but always laughing more. Life is full of grace: life has been infiltrated by God: the life of nations and the life of men. None of it is excluded: there is no place - no situation outside the realm of God's redeeming power: God is involved in life with us - when we are shooting at each other and when we are loving each other: when we are having babies and when we are dying.

William Stringfellow has, I believe, said it best: "....the most notorious, plain and victorious truth of God is that God participates in our history - even yours and mine. Our history - all our anxieties - have become the scene of his presence and the matter of His care. We are safe. We are free. Wherever we turn we shall discover that God is already there. Therefore, wherever it be, fear not, be thankful, rejoice and boast of God." [A Private and Public Faith p. 72]

Where you and I are grasped by that truth we are suddenly able to look into our own histories and see the power and presence of God, opening a door here - closing one there: creating a new possibility here - bringing meaning and growth there. That done we begin to see him now - moving us, urging us, holding us up when we stumble, creating us over and over. We begin, that is to say, to come to grips with a God of surprises.

Another woman bore a child, and was surprised, for her motherhood was even more unlikely than Sarah's. In a manner of speaking she laughed too; so did her kinswoman, Elizabeth and the baby in her womb. The biggest surprise of all is that God did come among us: the ancient Israelites were right - He's that kind

of God; and life suddenly has all kinds of possibilities it didn't have before.

That's the good news - we are surprised by kGod - He can and does and will make laughter for us.

I wish I had written the words I am about to read to you. They are from a book of reflections on being a minister by Robert K. Hudnut, but they deal with experiences common to us all -

"I think of the coffin on rollers and the freshly dug dirt and the six little chairs. I think of the young woman with laughter tumulting from her lips as she talks with her husband-to-be. I think of the little boy in an oxygen tent with his teddy bear at the foot of the bed. I think of the mother smiling the smile of first mothers as she tells of the birth of her child. And then I think of myself and my being there, and of God's coming somehow out of the nowhere into the now, here and being there, too."

Amen.

Startle us, O God with Your truth: open our minds to your Spirit: enable us to perceive your power and presence in our lives. Give us laughter - in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.